

# Deceit, ignorance, and interpretation in *Aeneid* book 4

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In book four of the *Aeneid* Aeneas and Dido, queen of Carthage, have an affair – and then he abandons her. What should we think of him? Ruth Parkes examines the case for and against Aeneas, and argues that having to decide what we think about Dido and Aeneas makes us as readers conscious of our role as interpreters of the poem.

So where do you stand on the Dido–Aeneas break-up? Is the leader of the Trojans the love-rat he appears to be? At first sight, the case against him looks pretty strong. We appear to have a classic(al) case of an alpha-male fleeing commitment once his partner starts getting too clingy, maybe even broody (remember, Dido is caught lamenting the lack of a ‘baby Aeneas’). Where is his famed *pietas* (‘duty’)? *Pietas* is a concept which involves honouring ties such as those to one’s gods, parents, and wife. In book 4 our confidence in Aeneas’ fulfilment of bonds may be shaken. Should he really be called *pious* (‘dutiful’) in the lines immediately following the scene in which he has provoked Dido to collapse – the woman who is his ‘host’ even if, as she remarks bitterly, she may not be called his ‘wife’.

## Married or not?

As well as being fickle, Aeneas seems deceitful. This part of the *Aeneid* is noticeably rich in words of deception, and most of these words centre around Aeneas. On the topic of Aeneas’ furtive preparations for departure, the narrator tells us that Dido realized his ‘tricks’ in advance (for who can ‘deceive’ a lover?). Dido’s first question is whether he, a ‘traitor’, thought he could ‘disguise’ such a wrong. She goes on to lament that ‘good faith’ isn’t safe anywhere. His behaviour within and after the relationship seems to have been marked by deceit and slipperiness. He claims, with a chilling legal formality, that he never entered into a marriage contract. Technically he may be right. We never see a wedding, only a parody of one in the cave scene where Juno serves as matron

of honour. But surely some bonds were formed in their winter-long affair? Anyway, Dido thinks that they were joined in marriage. Can he really have not realized that she was under this impression? After that first unplanned passionate tryst in the cave, did the question of the nature of their relationship never come up? Was he not leading her on? We might also consider Aeneas’ delay in telling Dido of his departure. Maybe he would never have got round to finding the right way to end things but left without a word, as Dido presumes (perhaps he would have abandoned her asleep as Theseus did Ariadne in Catullus’ poem 64, a work much in Vergil’s mind in this book). Further suggestions of Aeneas’ underhandedness come in his leaving speeches. Dido implies that Aeneas has been lying about his motives for going. He says the gods told him to leave. Of course they did. How convenient!

## Careless in losing Creusa?

Dido’s cynicism may prompt discomforting thoughts about the truth of Aeneas’ former words. We know that Dido repeatedly asks to hear Aeneas’ tale of his travels, which are narrated in books 2 and 3. Should she, we may wonder, have listened more sceptically, at least to the part concerning the loss of his wife Creusa? Did he accidentally lose her, as he claims? Or did he deliberately leave her behind? This is a suggestion raised by Ovid, writing after Vergil, in his verse letter purporting to be written by the rejected Dido. The Ovidian Dido suspects that Aeneas abandoned Creusa and admits she should have been warned. No such doubts are shown by the Vergilian Dido at the beginning of

book 4. In her infatuated state, Creusa’s loss would be noticeable for the fact it meant Aeneas was free to marry once again. However, once rejected, Dido does seem to question the truth of Aeneas’ reputation. When musing upon Aeneas’ bad faith, she notes, ‘they say he carried with him his native home-gods’, implying that such words are not to be trusted.

## A caring man?

In light of such arguments from the prosecution, what kind of case can be made on Aeneas’ behalf? Well, some points can be easily defended. It seems, for instance, unfair to characterize Aeneas as commitment-shy. He is shown to be a caring father (he cites concern for Ascanius’ welfare as one of the reasons why he must leave) and seems quite happy to put down roots: when Mercury comes to deliver Jupiter’s message, he catches sight of him laying out buildings. A few of Dido’s criticisms and suspicions, offered from her limited perspective, are clearly unfair. As readers, we have experienced Mercury’s visit: we know that Aeneas has been told to leave by the gods. We have also been told by the narrator that Aeneas was looking for a good opportunity to speak to Dido. His reluctance may be spineless but understandable (is there a good time to dump someone?).

Some other points, on the other hand, require more thought from the defence. Evidence must be marshalled, probabilities put forward. There are certainly ways of reading Aeneas’ behaviour in a much more positive fashion. It is not clear that he ever set out to trick Dido. The characters explicitly shown practising deceit in Carthage are deities, notably Juno, who engineers the cave meeting by altering the weather-forecast, and Venus, who inflames Dido with lust via her disguised son Cupid. As for Aeneas’ failure to honour his ties, this is a consequence of beginning the affair with Dido. Once he has entered into the relationship, the different ties he has come into conflict. He is *pious* in that he follows divine orders to leave, *impious* in that he breaks the relationship. It’s an impossible situation.

## Was he oblivious of Dido’s passion?

Furthermore, whilst one might think that two previously married and responsible adults would have discussed their relationship, perhaps in this case they did not. Their liaison seems marked by poor communication. It is noticeable that Dido sends Anna to plead for her: her sister (who, interestingly, was Aeneas’ lover in the earlier tradition) apparently understands him better than she herself does. As additional support for the argument that Aeneas was ignorant of Dido’s state of

mind, we might note that he is not always terribly astute when it comes to reading situations. In book 1, he fails to recognize his mother, who is disguised as a sexily dressed virgin huntress, until she reveals her true form at departure (is it surprising that Aeneas' relationships with the female sex are problematic? Wouldn't this sort of mind-game screw anyone up?). Then, while he waits in Juno's temple and admires the pictures on the walls, he interprets the heavy emphasis on Trojan defeat as revealing Carthaginian sympathy, missing the more obvious interpretation that the anti-Trojan goddess might find these scenes more to her taste.

### Not deceit but delusion?

The deceit involved in Dido and Aeneas' relationship is most obviously self-deceit. Dido accepts Anna's line that marrying Aeneas would be a good political move, but Iarbas' subsequent indignation at the affair suggests otherwise. Her judgement is coloured by her emotions. And should Dido be so indignant that Aeneas must leave to found his promised land when she has heard him tell her all about his destiny at the feast? She has listened to him saying that there is a 'royal wife' waiting for him in Italy. She has heard only what she wants to hear, that Aeneas is an available widower. Aeneas can also be seen to be deluding himself. He knows he is meant to found a settlement in Italy but he also knows from the Harpies and the prophet Helenus that he faces a long, tough struggle. Alone after the loss of his wife and father and desperate to settle down (as shown by his previous attempts to found cities in Thrace and Crete), we can see him as following his emotions, pushing aside the knowledge of the destiny that is thrust upon him.

Many of Aeneas' failings are, in fact, shared by Dido. Rumour is right to claim that they are both 'forgetful of their kingdoms'. They are also both forgetful of their other duties. Dido ignores her commitment to her dead husband; Aeneas does not think of what is best for his son until reminded by Mercury. Moreover, neither of them seems that good at listening to each other or communicating.

### The reader's role

Guilty or innocent? You decide. It is not surprising that, from Vergil's time onwards, the jury has been split over Aeneas' behaviour. First, the characters themselves seem ignorant and confused about the relationship. Second, we are trying to work out the nature of the relationship largely from two competing and partial points of view. As readers, we are

drawn to weigh the evidence. Yet we are offered little in the way of fact, only different versions – and we have seen the potential for personal stories to be misrepresented and misunderstood. It is surely no coincidence that Rumour, who mixes truth and lies, plays such an important part in the book. It falls to us to try to untangle the false and the true. In short, *Aeneid* 4 is all about interpretation. We are shown the difficulties it brings, and the perils of not doing it well. And the book's power lies in getting us to do it, in getting us involved.

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